37.

"No War No Peace:" The Next Generation

After the carnages at the Badme and Tserona fronts in early 1999, where Ethiopia suffered horrendous casualty levels, Ethiopia's military strategists conceived a war plan premised on bleeding Eritrea's economy to death by forcing Asmara to engage in an unsustainable mobilization to keep up with Ethiopia's mobilization. With an economy one seventh of Ethiopia's, and a population base one twentieth of its larger neighbor, the planners believed that Eritrea, had no chance in keeping up with Ethiopia's spending levels. This would allow Ethiopia to win an easy victory. No one stopped to think that the strategy was a double-edged sword, potentially injurious to both economies, and quite possibly more harmful to the larger economy.

The principal instrument for implementing the strategy was the microscopic and time-consuming examination of the Technical Arrangements. Why? Because Ethiopia needed time to arm hundreds of thousands of soldiers for an eventual invasion of Eritrea, under the pretext of "liberating" the contested territory the TPLF was claiming as its own. The strategy was based on three assumptions: the continuing indulgence of the OAU and its partners to Ethiopia's demands and threats; the generosity of the donor community with supplying relief commodities that could be diverted for the war effort; and, buying the silence of domestic critics to the war by dangling Assab to obtain their acquiescence to the military build-up and subsequent invasion of Eritrea.

As the TPLF expected, the OAU and its partners played their part in acceding to every demand to amend an un-amendable Technical Arrangements to guarantee Eritrea's rejection of the document and to paint Eritrea as the recalcitrant party. The international community, led by the US came through with one million tons of relief commodities that were easily diverted for the

war effort. The domestic critics kept quiet, hoping Assab would fall into their lap.

Prime Minister Meles had every reason to believe that his strategy would work. He boasted to a journalist that Ethiopia would attack at the right time, and not a day early, not a day late. Eritrea did not have a ghost of a chance to survive. Its army would be decimated, its government overthrown and sovereignty taken away, only to be returned at Mekele's sufferance after meeting strenuous terms of surrender, including but not limited to the handing over of Assab to Ethiopia. This was the expected plan and the outcome of the brilliant "No War, No Peace" strategy for which the May 12 invasion was launched. Prime Minister Meles was so certain the strategy would work that he confidently told a UN Security Council visiting team that Ethiopia would conclude the war quickly, to return to its primary task of fighting hunger and deprivation. The Prime Minister was smugly confident that the strategy, honed and planned so carefully for almost a year, would work. It did not.

Gobbling up empty territory the first few days, and boasting to a gullible world that Eritrea's forces had been "decimated," suggested that there would be no resistance all the way to Asmara. The plan would work, and Asmara would soon fall. Much of the world was on a prayer vigil for Eritrea. But after the first week or so, reality set in. The much-outnumbered Eritrean forces hit back from strategic positions of their choosing. From the top of their inhospitable hills and escarpments, they mowed down waves after waves of humanity. Apparently all the military analysts and nameless Addis Ababa based diplomats who projected Eritrea's imminent doom failed to do their homework: they never bothered to verify the stupendous military "successes" Ethiopia was claiming or the huge "losses" the Eritrean forces had allegedly suffered. Signs that the numbers Ethiopian commanders were citing of Eritrean divisions "decimated" or "put out of action" did not add up were everywhere. Secure in their superior knowledge of military science, the analysts did not want to admit that they were wrong. As professionals, however, their worst blunder was not to take into account the iron will of the Eritrean forces to defend the land, or the stout heart of the Eritrean people to fight for their sovereignty no matter what the cost.

Suffering unspeakable carnage at various points, the invasion run out steam. Ethiopia changed course and put everything, about eight divisions backed by a frightening array of heavy equipment, into capturing Assab. The campaign failed, suffering defeat after defeat over a one week engagement. Risking further losses deep in Ethiopian territory, Prime Minister Meles was forced to accept the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, June 18. The "No War, No Peace" strategy on which Mekele's war planners had counted heavily to give them control of Eritrea was a miserable failure. Still too weak

to resume the war, but lacking in courage to make peace, yet needing time to know what to do next, the TPLF returned with an updated version of its failed strategy: "No War, No Peace: The Next Generation."

The purpose of the updated version of the failed strategy was to buy time by dragging the implementation of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, to avoid demarcation at all cost. As with the Technical Arrangement, Ethiopia would come with amendments and proposals intended to gut the Agreement and to provoke Eritrea into taking retaliatory actions, so as to stop, or at least delay the deployment of UN peace keeping forces in the border. This included laying mines in the occupied Eritrean areas, and to prevent the return of the civilian population to their homes and fields, to prevent them from planting crops. Domestically the TPLF has tried to hold the regime's critics at bay by selling them the political opium that the campaign against Eritrea was consistent with Ethiopia's role as Regional Power. But in doing so, the government opened a Pandora's box, giving legitimacy to discussions it could not control, and the end result would be, at best, problematic for the regime.

There are several reasons that the updated strategy of delaying the process may not work. This time it's not the OAU but rather the UN Security Council that's driving the implementation of the OAU peace package. What's on the table is not the Technical Arrangements that could be held hostage through TPLF's intransigence. What we have is the implementation of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities under the auspices of the Security Council, and at the request of the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea. With the approval of sending 100 military observers, the Security Council has set in motion the implementation of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities. Ethiopia would find it difficult if not impossible to derail the momentum towards the redeployment of Ethiopian forces from Eritrean soil. Once the entire UN peacekeeping force assigned for the mission is in place inside Eritrea, Ethiopian forces would have to leave occupied Eritrean territory. The UN Cartographic Unit would commence delimitation and demarcation, according to the OAU Framework Agreement. How long would it take to complete the process? It depends on how serious the Security Council is in insisting that the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities and the OAU Framework for Peace to which Ethiopia and Eritrea have agreed are implemented without delay. Ethiopia should not be allowed to wreak havoc with the Agreements and the OAU peace package as it did with the Technical Arrangements.

Would the TPLF enjoy the sight of three to four thousand UN peacekeeping forces on the Eritrean side of the border, spending hard currency on goods and services Eritrea will provide? Very unlikely. Either the TPLF would cooperate as expeditiously so as to cut the troops' stay on Eritrean soil or Meles, to bring in hard currency for Tigray, would change his mind about

UN troops on Ethiopian soil. But since the UN mandate is on the Eritrea side of the border, the TPLF's request for a portion of the troops may not be easily accommodated. So it's quite possible that the TPLF may prefer to expedite the process.

Ethiopia cannot and will not openly defy the Security Council by resuming the war. Even if it wanted to, economically it lacks the wherewithal for another major operation. Donors are least likely to fund, even indirectly, another campaign. Ethiopia's economic situation has reached crisis proportion. As the Addis Ababa based paper Monitor has noted (August 1), "the general economic problem of the country is really colossal and frightening." The paper also estimated that last year's revenues would be two third of the estimate, while ruefully acknowledging that Ethiopia cannot "expect to get external financial resources because of her characteristic defiance to being ordered by big and rich foreign powers." It never occurred to the paper that the deficit might have something to do with the costly war. The UN Security Council, the epitome of the "big and rich foreign powers," is saying that Ethiopia should live up to the terms of the agreement it has signed.

Furthermore, the "big and rich countries" may have learned a valuable lesson. Their generous assistance to help Ethiopia's needy was diverted to finance an invasion of a member of the United Nations while creating a massive humanitarian crisis, catastrophic damages and destruction of economic and social assets and massive looting. The preliminary estimate, which does not include the areas still occupied by Ethiopian troops, runs over 300 million dollars.

The donor community has never faced a situation such as this. It is unique when an aid and relief assistance financed an invasion that generates massive damages in another country and further necessitate the world community to step in to fix the damage that its ill advised aid had wrought. What's more, had the world community tried harder to rein in Ethiopia, instead of indulging Ethiopia every step of the way the previous two years the invasion would never have taken place. Now the world has learned its lesson. Ethiopia is unlikely to receive the huge amounts of assistance it was able to divert for the war effort. Without such aid, Ethiopia still does not have either Massawa, the closest port to the Tigray heartland, or Assab. But to get indirect control over Massawa, it must be able to form a government in Eritrea answerable to Mekele. But its failure to seize Assab, meant zero possibility of imposing draconian terms of surrender, forcing Eritreans to accept a Mekele blessed government in Asmara. While the critics were only interested in severing Assab from Eritrea, the TPLF aimed higher: to bring all of Eritrea under Mekele's control. The regime's critics would give up all the contested areas north of Tigray for Assab, a nightmarish trade off inconceivable for the TPLF. Still, the TPLF would not

mind its critics' continuing fixation with Assab since this might influence the decision on delimitation and demarcation.

When the May 12 invasion failed in the red-hot oven of the Bure line the second week of June, the TPLF's dream of hegemony over Eritrea crumbled. The failed invasion, however, had another unwelcome byproduct for the regime: it emboldened the regimes' opponents to demand to renegotiate Eritrea's independence. This the TPLF could not or would not do. It put Meles in the unusual position of having to declare that Assab is Eritrean. The TPLF knows better than its critics that the Eritrean people would fight tooth and nail to defend their land. The TPLF knows what it is talking about because it tried and failed, at a horrendous cost to its economy and people. The "No War, No Peace: the Second Generation" strategy would do no better than the original version. It will fail.

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